RECOLLECTIONS, APOLOGIES, AND POSSIBILITIES

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RECOLLECTIONS

In looking back over the last few years of research, theory, and practice in learning disabilities (LD), we must conclude that the topics of research are very similar but the quality much improved, and there is more balance and attention given to comprehension research than in the past when the perceptual and mechanical aspects of learning dominated the landscape. There are new names (authors) and old names, and some significant advances that hold promising new opportunities. Sadly, we are still trying to define learning disabilities, and some have begun to argue for the more postmodern and critical definitions (more about this later). In part, the field has been restricted ever since the first legislation locked us into a reductionistic way of seeing, defining, and treating LD. The legalism surrounding LD also has kept us asking ourselves "Is it legal?" or "Can we get away with it?" rather than "Is this the very best we can do?" Hopefully, refinements to law will open up new possibilities.

APOLOGIES

Overzealous Ideologies

As I (Poplin) looked at the new work and thought about my own contributions to the field, I wondered how I would change them if I were to write them today. I would like to begin with an apology for some errors (Poplin, 1988a, 1988b, 1996). In my later publications I outlined various pedagogies and suggested that only, what I called, the least reductionistic (constructivism, feminism, and critical pedagogies) were appropriate. I was ideologically enamored with these pedagogies and believed they would significantly change the effectiveness of our instruction, but I was wrong. I was not wrong to present the alternatives to reductionism (though I see now how they may also be reductionistic). We needed them desperately, but I was wrong to be so dogmatically ideological.

My error of making ideologies the center rather than the student was challenged a few times. I remember stepping into a classroom one day and seeing children writing. A six-year-old child asked the teacher to spell a word for her. The teacher said, "Just spell it as it sounds; this is a draft." What a progressive teacher, I thought. The child asked the teacher several more times but to no avail, and soon she was weeping. Her own character resisted writing a word she knew was misspelled.

Delpit's (1995) critique of constructivist practices for black children was the final blow to my ideological stubbornness. She demonstrated that for many African American children, there is no Standard English language inside them waiting for the right experience to "draw it forth," arguing that the processes we were using in constructivist classes frequently clashed with cultural and linguistic norms of students' home lives.

Ideologies are useful theoretically to help us devise diverse strategies and practices, but lethal when they become prisons to our thinking and acting with children.

Direct Instruction

Related to the error of promoting particular ideologies too strongly was my (Poplin's) second error, which was to suggest that there was no place for reductionistic practices. Now, we would have to admit that there are situations when behaviorist practices of reducing a skill and teaching it directly works best.

Our concerns for reductionistic practices remain, however. A diet of primarily reductionistic teaching is a poor one because while we are drilling too much on things that can be reduced, (a) students may not be

connecting these small skills to anything they already know (schema or funds of knowledge) and (b) students are not being engaged in issues that cannot be reduced, such as purpose, justice, ethics, goodness, sacrifice, and commitment. We would argue for more balance and for the field to analyze its research in order to find where the various pedagogies are most/least effective.

Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes working from what our students bring, and while that is appealing and necessary, it is not nearly enough. First our students need skills to succeed in the world, and they need to have experiences where they are directed (yes, even teacher-directed). But more important, our students desperately need intellectual capital (Hirsch, 1999). The funds of knowledge students bring are important, but unless we add to these the intellectual capital (à la Hirsch) or culture of power (à la Delpit) of the nation and world that will provide them opportunities to think big ideas and relate these in dialogue with others, they are unlikely to succeed in the larger arenas of life.

Our suggestion is that while we are working on letter sounds and math facts, we find ways to engage students in texts (read to them if necessary) where the "big ideas" give them intellectual and moral sustenance. Marva Collins' work (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990) can be instructive here. Her methods may be reductionistic, but her high student expectations lead her to engage even young and "disabled" children in texts far beyond what schools believe they can handle (see also Thorson, 1996.) I (Rogers, 1999) found that special education classrooms grossly underestimate the abilities of children to communicate when I looked at the communication of an ethnically diverse group of students in their homes. *The field of learning disabilities must grapple with and overcome its own low expectations.*

Social Construction and Critical Theory in Learning Disabilities

For many years we have tried to raise the sociopolitical and race issues in learning disabilities (e.g., LDQ special issue on cultural pluralism, 1983; Poplin, 1988b; Poplin & Cousin, 1996). Social constructivism and critical theory offer the best explanations for the social inequities we see in the schools today, including those in special education. However, we do not believe this is the whole truth of learning disabilities, and we question whether critical theory sets forth an agenda that corrects the problems it so aptly identifies. Critical theory's failure to do so is in part due to its unswerving commitment to Marxist and postmodern ideologies.

We came face-to-face with these issues in 2000 as we began to see how these ideologies encouraged teachers to critique schools but not their own practice; they knew how to teach Marxist ideology but not how to teach reading (Poplin & Rivera, 2005). Many educators are deeply committed to social justice (via critical theory and social constructivism) and many policy makers are committed to accountability (via achievement measures). These people generally inhabit different communities often vehemently opposed to one another. Yet, we learned from our colleague, John Rivera, that accountability and social justice are inseparable. Strong accountability for the achievement of the poor and those with disabilities can substantially help promote social justice (and self-esteem). *While we know that there are many quirks to be worked out, we are strongly optimistic about efforts such as No Child Left Behind (a) to eliminate all kinds of achievement gaps, (b) to force us to revise our low expectations, (c) to hold ourselves accountable for all our students' progress (e.g., by race, class and disability categories), and (d) to diminish our dependence on evaluation by feelings or by ideology.*

Critical theory suggests that because of the oppressive, restrictive nature of schooling, children who do not conform to or do not excel in these structures have been labeled LD and the field has been invented to assist in making them conform to standards set by the dominant culture. Additionally, because of the desire of white middle- and upper-class parents to get special help for their failing youngsters, the field was constructed as an alternative to other, less attractive, disability categories to which poor children are typically assigned.

Critical theory also suggests that there are significant differences between middle-class and poor children with LD and that racist and classist practices result in overrepresentation of children of color in special education (Artiles, 2003; Cousin, Diaz, Flores, & Hernandez, 1996; Goldstein, 1996; Ortiz, 1997; Poplin, 1984, 1986; Rhodes, 1996; Ruiz, 1996a, 1996b; Ruiz, Rueda, Figueroa, & Boothroyd, 1996; Sleeter, 1987). Bertucci (2000) demonstrated that middle- and upper-class parents often get expensive private school placements (at public expense) simply because they have the means to hire lawyers and have the cultural knowledge of how to use the law to get what they want, while other people's children (the poor and children of color) are relegated to punitive discipline centers. (Alternatively, Cheng [2004] has suggested that there are also many possibilities for students of color when we are aware of how to draw them out.) So the conclusion of these and other analyses is that the field of LD is ripe with political disparities and that to some degree LD is a cultural and sociopolitical invention (Artiles, 2003; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004).

We want to reiterate that most children who end up with the label LD also appear to demonstrate some sort

of atypical psychological phenomenon that limits their learning to do simple academic tasks as easily as their peers. And it is possible to determine this discrepancy even for students of color compared to their peers of color. It is for these and other reasons that we agree also with Kauffman (2002) that too much postmodernism and critical theory can "deform" education in all sorts of ways. We cannot lose sight of the fact that reading and math are real and that the ability to perform these skills makes a tremendous difference in a person's life. We can debate whether this should be so, whether it is a sociopolitical construction, whether it is true in all cultures, and whether it is a right- or left-wing political conspiracy, but for our students they are essential skills that will make it more feasible to achieve their own destinies. *We trust that the leaders in the field could sit down and work out where the political/cultural models and the psychological models best explain and offer solutions.*

MORE POSSIBILITIES

In addition to citing the encouraging new and extended developments mentioned earlier, we would like to focus on a few more possibilities. Personally, we are most enthusiastic about two lines of research we see emerging: intensive interventions and longitudinal studies.

First, we are very encouraged by an intensive program of instruction for urban students of color who were in prereferral processes for special education that resulted in only 2 of over 60 students requiring special education services one year later (Montgomery & Moore-Brown, 2003; Montgomery, Moore-Brown, Bielinski, & Shubin, in review). These California educators built an intense 45-hour instructional program from the National Reading Panel's building blocks of reading and used it to instruct 60 students of color who were on their way to special education referral and classification. *The success of this program causes us to wonder whether blocks of very intensive, highly structured, and well-researched instruction might be a better special education intervention (as well as deterrent) than the slow, drawn-out one that consists of several hours per day or week of a lower-intensity special instruction that we currently prescribe almost without thinking.*

Second, the works that we find both alarming and hopeful are the longitudinal studies of people who have been labeled LD (e.g., Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hay, & Thomas, 2003; Gerber & Reiff, 1992; Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, & Herman, 2002; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsburg, 1997; Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1992). First, we find it alarming that there are so few adult thrivers among the group and so many who report powerlessness, meaninglessness, and estrangement. But we find it encouraging that there is information about the characteristics of those who do thrive. Clearly, the thrivers have developed self-understanding, resilience, self-awareness, perseverance, pro-activity, coping strategies, goal setting/directing strategies, and social networks such that their disability has not overwhelmed them. *We need to establish strategies that (a) help students (and their teachers) to think and talk about the greater purposes in their lives; (b) assist them in defining their strengths (outside of just academic ones – diligence, perseverance, commitment, self-awareness, and goal directedness); and (c) address the possibilities for employment and meaningful work in the larger world, including non-college track professions.* It seems to us that even a small portion of the week devoted to defining, engaging, and pursuing students' gifts, interests, and purposes would be well worth the effort (Warren, 2002). Then we would have a more solid foundation upon which to help students hook the more reductionistic tasks of sound-letter correspondence, memory, comprehension, and mathematical facts and concepts.

Everybody needs to see a future and to hope; thus the role of special issues such as these. We are grateful for having had the opportunity to contribute a few comments.

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